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## Drag shows aim to bolster downtown San Francisco

by Matthew S. Bajko, Assistant Editor | Monday June 5, 2023

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Drag artist Bobby Friday greets customers at Schroeder's June 1 during the first Drag Me Downtown event.

Photo: Matthew S. Bajko

To kickoff Pride Month the downtown San Francisco German restaurant Schroeder's had turned a portion of its dining room into a performance area with a screened in dressing room. A DJ booth had been set up in one corner, and rainbow-themed decorations had been festooned on the wood-paneled walls.

About half past 5 p.m. last Thursday, June 1, drag performer Bobby Friday kicked off the evening's entertainment by lip-syncing to Madonna's "Where's the Party" from her 1986 album "True Blue." As she danced to the song's fitting lyrics — "*Working Monday through Friday / Takes up all of my time / If I can get to the weekend / Everything will work out just fine*" — the gathered diners bopped along and cheered on Friday as she worked the room.

"This is a very special show," Friday noted after completing her performance.

The reason being that the restaurant, established in 1893, hadn't hosted a drag show until last week.



Drag king Madd Dog 20/20 talks to Liz Polo during Drag Me Downtown. Photo: Matthew S. Bajko

In attendance were friends Liz Polo and Damien Keller, who both work nearby. Polo, a straight ally, owns Polo Promotions and has had an office in the city's downtown business district for 22 years.

One of her clients is Schroeder's, as she has helped with its marketing efforts. When COVID struck back in March 2020, the city ordered all non-essential businesses to shutter, forcing restaurants to close their dining rooms and most employees of downtown offices to pivot to working from home.

"We saw the devastation with COVID. When I would walk by here, this place would be empty," recalled Polo. "Everyone says they want to support local businesses, but it takes action to support them. We need to walk in and order drinks or food and be there for each other."

Keller, a gay man originally from San Diego, agreed. He has worked in the hospitality industry in the Bay Area for several decades and had just been hired as director of sales and marketing for the Galleria Park

Furloughed during that time, Keller eventually returned to work. This year the hotel has seen its business rebound, he said, and is nearly sold out over Pride weekend later this month.

"This is a great way to celebrate Pride," said Keller of the special drag show. "Especially with what is going on in the world today with drag, visibility is important."

He was referring to the bans against drag performances and laws attacking drag performers being adopted in conservative-led states. In Florida, the administration of Governor Ron DeSantis, a Republican presidential candidate, has targeted the liquor licenses of businesses that host drag shows, as the Bay Area Reporter has reported ([https://www.ebar.com/story.php?ch=news&sc=latest\\_news&id=323733](https://www.ebar.com/story.php?ch=news&sc=latest_news&id=323733)). (A federal judge on June 2 struck down Tennessee's law that restricted drag shows as unconstitutional.)

"More than ever I want to go out to support drag. When someone says 'Don't do it,' I want to do it more," said Keller.

### **Downtown coming back**

As for San Francisco's business district, Keller noted that, "downtown is coming back."

The drag show was the brainchild of Robbie Silver, executive director of the Downtown SF Partnership, a nonprofit that promotes businesses and provides services in the city's Financial District and Jackson Square Historic District areas. The Vallejo resident had landed on the idea during one of his morning commutes via ferry.

"My staff calls them my 'ferry thoughts.' Seeing the Golden Gate Bridge when it is not foggy is inspiring," explained Silver, adding that most of his best ideas come to him while crossing San Francisco Bay.

A few months ago he came into work not only with the idea to put on drag shows in downtown venues but also with a name for the endeavor, "Drag Me Downtown." He budgeted \$40,000 toward it and empowered his community benefit district's staff to implement it.

"Arts and culture belongs in downtown San Francisco and drag belongs in downtown San Francisco," Silver, 31, told the B.A.R. during a joint interview with Friday outside of Schroeder's at one of its parklet tables. "Bringing drag to downtown is a new concept."

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While several venues, from restaurants and hotels to nightclubs and bars, have hosted drag shows in the area on weekend nights or Sundays during brunch, and during Pride weekend at the end of June, post-work drag shows on weekdays aren't a common occurrence in San Francisco's financial district, several business leaders in the area told the B.A.R.



Robbie Silver, left, executive director of the Downtown SF Partnership, talks with drag artist Bobby Friday outside of Schroeder's. Photo: Matthew S. Bajko

### Popular entertainment

Long a beloved entertainment within the LGBTQ community, drag shows have taken off in popularity with the general public over the last decade largely due to the success of the television competition show "RuPaul's Drag Race." Silver is a fan of the show and, though a few seasons behind, watches it via a streaming service with his mom, whom he moved up from Riverside to help care for five years ago.

With headlines blaring that San Francisco's downtown is in a "doom loop" of demise, due to employees working remotely and stores shuttering for a lack of customers, Silver wanted to change the narrative and felt hosting drag shows in June would be a novel approach for drawing people back to the area and

"I wanted to add a little queer flair to what would be a heteronormative downtown," said Silver, adding that his drag name would be Silver Linings. "Coming out of COVID downtown needs to come out of the 9 to 5 mindset and offer opportunities for not only performers but also attendees to come downtown after hours and see a drag show."

It had an even more personal component for Silver, who years ago befriended the owner of Riverside gay bar The Menagerie, David St. Pierre. In September, after a long battle against cancer, St. Pierre died at the age of 59.

"I felt his presence in the room," said Silver about watching the drag show at Schroeder's.

Speaking publicly for the first time about his own sexual orientation, Silver is bisexual and only came out of the closet to his mother three years ago. He did so after breaking up with a boyfriend and his mother, noticing he was upset, asked him what girl had broken his heart. In reply, Silver showed her a pick of his ex.

Recalling the story, Silver joked to the B.A.R., "I guess this is my coming out party."

Hired at the age of 29 to oversee the Downtown SF Partnership, making him one of the youngest executive directors of such an entity, Silver has always been "in awe" of the architectural details of the area's buildings and its history. He first came to the city as a teenager with his cousin shortly after they had gotten their driver's licenses and took a road trip to Northern California.

He had bought a poster of San Francisco's downtown, which hung in his dorm room at California Baptist University in Riverside, from which he graduated in 2014 with a degree in communications. Nearly a decade later he now works as one of the area's biggest boosters.

"San Francisco has always been a welcoming place to be. It has always been welcoming to me," said Silver, first hired to be the marketing director for the Union Square Business Improvement District in 2018.

Friday is the drag persona of Bobby Rivera, 39, a gay man who is also initially from Southern California. Born in Los Angeles, he "lived all over" the area until moving to Gilroy right before high school after his mother met his stepfather and they relocated to be with him.

(http://www.sanmateocountyfair.com) For the last 25 years, he has called San Francisco home and currently lives in the Mission and works as a (http://www.sanmateocountyfair.com) (https://www.facebook.com/BayAreaReporter/) (https://www.twitter.com/ebarnews/) hair stylist at Revamp Salon on 16th Street. About five years ago he started performing as Bobby Friday, (https://www.ebar.com/rss.php) (https://www.youtube.com/c/BayAreaReporterSF) which was a nickname a friend gave him during his clubbing days in his 20s, and was crowned Grand Duchess 48 last year by the Grand Ducal Council Of San Francisco.

Friday founded the Haus of Friday, a company specializing in custom-styled wigs and merchandise, as well as event production and hosting. Her wig styling business is called Wigs By Friday.

Every second Saturday of the month Friday hosts and performs at Pop Up Brunch at Beaux, a gay nightclub in the Castro LGBTQ district. At the nearby gay bar Lookout, she hosts the drag show Glamatron every third Thursday of the month, and this month she will be working the drag brunches on Saturdays at the venue 650 Jones with the same street address in the city's Tenderloin.

Melissa Buckminster, the Downtown SF Partnership's marketing and communications manager, had reached out to Friday with an offer to come on board as a consultant and producer of the drag show pop-up performances the organization wanted to present each Thursday night in June. Friday loved the idea of bringing drag performers to venues they normally wouldn't perform in.

"San Francisco has always been known as a queer mecca, which is a beautiful thing for the LGBTQ-plus community. But it is interesting that parts of the city haven't gotten to experience that," said Friday. "For instance, I was surprised to learn this restaurant and bar has been here that long and never had a drag show. That was interesting to me."

Her only expectation for the pop-up event at Schroeder's was that "everyone had fun," said Friday. "I think we did that."

Seeing a packed house of people clapping for and supporting the drag performers "was incredibly amazing," said Silver, and portends the initiative should be a success.

"It is going to be a good time for Pride in San Francisco," predicted Silver.

All of the drag pop-up events run from 5 to 7 p.m. This Thursday, June 8, it will take place at Latin Steakhouse, 56 Belden Place. For June 15, the flower market Nigella, at 388 Market Street, Suite 105, will host it.



It moves to One Market Restaurant, 1 Market Street, on June 22 and to Pagan Idol, 375 Bush Street, on June 29.

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 (<https://www.ebar.com/rss.php>)  (<https://www.youtube.com/c/BayAreaReporterSF>) Friday is hosting the next two pop-ups then turning over emceeing duties to MGM Grande, with Bionka

Simone overseeing the final one of the month. The featured performers last week were drag king Madd Dogg 20/20 and drag queen Rahni NothingMore.

Others set to perform include Coco Buttah, Dulce De Leche, Helixer Jynder Byntwell, Jota Mercury, Mary Vice, Nicki Jizz, Vera, and Voodonna Black. They run the gamut from male drag queens to nonbinary and transgender drag performers.

"Drag is an art form and it encompasses everything and everyone," noted Friday.

While the Drag Me Downtown events are free to attend, tipping of the performers is recommended. (At the June 1 pop-up Friday gave a tutorial for how to hold up bills of a dollar or more for the performers and had a diner practice screaming out, "Yes, work slave take my fucking money!")

Those who pre-register for \$10 via the website (<https://downtownsf.org/do/drag-me-downtown>) receive a free fan and feather boa, which were procured from Polo's promotional business. The proceeds benefit Trans Thrive, the transgender drop-in center operated by the SF Community Health Center that moved into its own space earlier this year at 1460 Pine Street near Larkin.

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